
**Time and Mind:
The Journal of
Archaeology,
Consciousness
and Culture**

Volume 4—Issue 3
November 2011
pp. 361–364

DOI:
10.2752/175169711X13046099195717

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Book Review

The Light from the Forest: The Ritual Use of Ayahuasca in Brazil

**Beatriz Caiuby Labate and
Edward MacRae (eds)**

Equinox Publishing, 2006
Pb, 218 pp. ISBN 9787774548334

Reviewed by David Luke

Dated 2006, officially published in 2008, and finally released in 2010, this special edition of the academic journal *Fieldwork in Religion* gives English-speakers access to eight articles previously available only in Portuguese, if they were published at all. They deal with the ritual use of ayahuasca in Brazil, although their focus is confined to the three largest Brazilian religions that make sacramental use of the drug—Santo Daime, União do Vegetal (UDV), and Barquinha—and there is little about the seventy-two indigenous groups who use ayahuasca in the Western Amazon region, except when these introduce the psychedelic brew to the three main groups. Nevertheless, for Anglophone scholars this is an invaluable cultural history and ethnography of ritual among the main non-indigenous religious ayahuasca groups in Brazil. All but one of the eight authors are based in the country, so that they give academic perspectives from and on Brazil to the rapidly expanding English-language community of ayahuasca researchers.

The eight chapters offer a review of the Brazilian literature on ayahuasca religions (not including that of indigenous groups), an account of how these religions arose among rubber tappers first encountering the indigenous peoples of the forests, studies on the ritual use of ayahuasca in the UDV, Barquinha, and Santo Daime churches, and finally a report on the controversial use of cannabis in a branch of the Santo Daime.

A psychedelic decoction, ayahuasca has been used traditionally as a shamanic tool for accessing visionary altered states of consciousness among Amazonian tribes for hundreds if not thousands of years. Scouring the Brazilian literature, both academic and non-academic, Beatriz Caiuby Labate traces the cultural history of the three main churches from their rubber-tapper origins. The first Santo Daime community, called Alto Santo, was founded during the 1930s in the city of Rio Branco (in the state of Acre) by Mestre Raimundo Irineu Serra, a rubber tapper, a soldier of the Territorial Guard, and, later, a respected *curandeiro* or healer. Alto Santo fractured in the 1970s when Padrinho Sebastião Mota de Melo broke away and founded a new branch, the Centro Eclético da Fluente Luz Universal Raimundo Irineu Serra (CEFLURIS).

Having also practiced with Mestre Irineu in Rio Branco, the ex-sailor Frei Daniel Pereira de Mattos established the Barquinha (little boat) religious community there in 1945. Unlike the Santo Daime and the UDV, which have both spread across Brazil and beyond, including the USA, the Barquinha has never reached any further than the state of Acre. The UDV began independently of both the Santo Daime and Barquinha, and was officially established in 1965 in Porto Velho (in the state of Rondônia) by the rubber tapper Mestre José Gabriel da Costa, although it had reputedly been founded earlier in 1961 at the Sunta rubber camp on the Bolivian–Brazilian border.

Since the early 1980s there have been numerous academic investigations into these new religions and Caiuby Labate synthesizes and analyzes some sixty or more studies (all in Portuguese). Most of them are academic

theses, with a few other publications from ayahuasca churches and the users themselves. The academic texts are largely anthropological but there have also been psychiatric, psychological, and architectural approaches. This comprehensive guide offers an essential insight into the Brazilian literature, representing the various approaches that research has taken and indicating what directions it make take in the future, such as investigating the rise in spirit incorporation that has taken place during the last decade within the CEFLURIS Santo Daime church.

It might well be asked how such mediumship has come to infuse the Santo Daime, and *The Light from the Forest* neatly unpacks such doctrinal influences on the three religious movements. In tracing the religious origins of the groups, the notion of syncretism is deftly handled; the authors record the amalgamation of beliefs and practices from a wide array of perspectives, without implying that earlier religions were somehow perfect and now something is missing from the new movement. Instead, these new religions incorporate (quite literally in some cases) a wealth of religious influences. Each of the three groups derives its spiritual inspiration, in varying degrees, from three continents. There are European influences, such as Catholicism and Kardec Spiritism, and even Masonry in the case of UDV. Afro-Brazilian influences from the Umbanda cult are also apparent, with elements of the African Casa das Minas and other traditions appearing in the UDV; and finally, each group is ultimately defined by native Brazilian practices through the taking of ayahuasca itself, and through the reverence shown to and the use made of *caboclos*, the spirits of dead indigenes.

Wladimir Sena Araújo's chapter on Barquinha cosmology elucidates how each of the three continents has contributed its own methodology for approaching the divine: prayer from Catholicism, incorporation from the African traditions, and visionary experience from the indigenes. And each of these techniques offers a different relationship to the spirit world, since prayer facilitates faith in and a reverence for spirit, visions mediate a direct experience of spirit, and incorporation enables a becoming of spirit.

As the influence of these different doctrines varies in the three ayahuasca groups, we see varying degrees of recourse to the spiritual technologies associated with them, particularly with regard to incorporation. Although heavily influenced by Afro-Brazilian groups the UDV do not incorporate, whereas the Barquinha do, although they describe it as "irradiation," a less complete embodiment of spirit in which the spirit radiates through them rather than fully incorporating. Less well-documented is the incorporation that occurs at some rites among certain members of the CEFLURIS branch of the Santo Daime. In each case it appears that the degree of physical movement allowed within the rite corresponds to the degree of incorporation. The UDV do not dance, while the Santo Daime ordinarily perform a highly controlled dance (the *bailado*) to facilitate group order and obedience in mediumistic rites, although some members, like the Barquinha, occasionally engage in more freeform dancing or spinning; they also practice full incorporation as a form of mediumship development. Among the Santo Daime this synthesis with the mediumistic techniques of

Umbanda has been dubbed "Umbandaime." No one has made a definitive analysis of this fusion and we need to learn what the use of psychedelic plants and mediumship combined can give to each other. These techniques of approaching the divine come from divergent backgrounds, and the two techniques are seldom combined elsewhere, although both are found across the world in their separate forms.

There is much more in this book than can be elucidated here, particularly with regard to the cultural history of the churches and the use of symbolism and ritual within them. This includes the making of the ayahuasca brew (the *feitio*) among the Santo Daime, the creation of sacred and symbolic space, the different types of ceremonies and celebrations within the churches, the use of ayahuasca for healing and as a talisman, the classification of encountered spirits, and the doctrines, beliefs, and traditions of the faithful, such as the use of exorcism in the Barquinha.

The final chapter, by Edward MacRae, addresses the religious use of cannabis within CEFLURIS. At first this seems like the odd one out in the collection, but it does much to illuminate the contrasting political approaches of the groups and define the relationships between them. Outlining a history of tension between CEFLURIS and both the UDV and the Brazilian authorities, MacRae discusses ayahuasca's tenuous status within Brazilian law, which, despite several challenges, allows it to be legal solely for religious purposes and not for healing. Given that both Barquinha and the Santo Daime, unlike the UDV, have used ayahuasca within the shamanic healing context in which it was adopted, this legislative restriction to its use antagonizes the former groups. It also shows

the contempt felt by Brazilian authorities for indigenous traditions and their preference for a dominion over health and well-being that will be medical, not magical.

These three religious traditions have utilized the highly psychoactive jungle decoction, ayahuasca, to bring together a culturally diverse set of theological beliefs and practices, and extend its use from the indigenous Amazonians, via rubber tappers, to the urban elite of Brazil and beyond; now this juicy volume brings the Brazilian analysis of these traditions to the wider English-speaking world. It is a densely written book, erudite and highly informative, presenting cultural, sociopolitical and, historical dimensions; but it could have included more phenomenological material, given the extraordinary effects on consciousness of

the sacrament in question. Nevertheless, this book brings together a wealth of otherwise inaccessible scholarship on the anthropology of consciousness with respect to ayahuasca, a substance and a subject that is becoming increasingly popular both inside and outside of academia. Ayahuasca is important for its ancient shamanic tradition of use, its intense psychological effects and ontological consequences, its unique chemical constitution (one found also in the human brain), and its exceptional status as a drug both physiologically harmless and legal (within Brazil and certain US states at least). Given all these things, I can see that interest in this substance as a mediator between science and magic, and between ancient and modern culture and consciousness, can only continue to grow.